

## Considering the reality of hegemonic tendencies: English and linguistic diversity

Miguel Mantero

*The University of Alabama, USA*

### Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the commodification aspect of dominant languages, in particular, English, while looking into linguistic diversity as a commodity in its own right. In order to illustrate multilingualism as a valuable commodity in itself, we mention Immersion Programs in the US and the increasing recognition of the importance of being proficient in languages other than English, for educational, personal, economic and national security reasons. This research also aims to look into some aspects of the delicate issue of English being strengthened over the weakening of thousands of local languages and cultures. Some arguments are provided in order to illustrate the fact that ‘global English’ represents special politico-economic interests that cannot meet the needs of the people whose languages and cultures are being subjugated by the imperialistic and capitalist ideologies of the spread of English. Unless local language policies are elevated on political agendas, globalization language policies will remain insensitive to the irreplaceable value of linguistic diversity, along with the real needs of citizens from all over the world.

**Keywords:** Global English, Globalization, Linguistics Diversity, politico economic, language ideology

### Introduction

When it comes to discussing hegemonic tendencies of global languages, it is inevitable to admit the undeniable fact that English has reached the ‘almighty’ status of *lingua franca* in the world of science, technology, business and global politics. Without English proficiency in any of these areas mentioned above, an individual is fated to become excluded from the rest of his occupation community around the world.

On one hand, English has played (and continues to play) a crucial role in the economic growth of several countries around the world. It has

become an important asset in allowing for better career opportunities in national and international job markets and it has guaranteed the survival of many countries' economies in today's global economy. However, the numerous language policies in favor of the spread of English around the world maintain and perpetuate the imperialistic role of English, while speakers of most languages have their linguistic human rights neglected. While many countries are attempting to issue laws to protect their local languages from the influence of English, those same countries are putting significant effort and money into developing successful English-teaching programs. One of the reasons for these two conflicting paradigms ('diffusion of English X ecology of languages') is that, at the same time that there are linguistic efforts seeking to maintain the cultural diversity in countless countries, those same countries need to survive in the global economy and politics, and English is vital in that endeavor. Besides, English has become a profitable commodity around the world, along with other dominant languages, such as Spanish. Although many still regard English-teaching as a liberal profession, it is undoubtedly a very profitable industry, supported and propagated by language policymakers and linguistic institutes with special interests.

## **The hegemonic tendencies of global languages**

### ***Political and economic factors***

Suarez (2015) elucidates how language policies and educational systems have been influenced by politico-economic factors in Singapore, Ireland and Puerto Rico over the past decades. These three countries share some similarities - they are small island nations with long colonial histories, and have raised English as their primary instructional language, mainly to achieve English proficiency in order to attract foreign capital. Since communication costs are among the major costs of investing abroad, and English is the *lingua franca* in the world of science, technology and business, that explains the reason why multinationals prioritize investing in countries where the labor force, such as scientists and engineers, is proficient in English. Other issues that influenced the changes in language policies in these three countries are interests of dominant political parties and the need for interethnic communication. However, she emphasizes that attracting foreign investments was at the top of the list in the three examples.

Language policies are directly influenced by a country's economic model and that English becoming the primary instructional language has guaranteed economic growth in these three countries. On the other hand,

although English is the medium to survive in the global economy, the language instructional policies of these countries are evidently far from being culturally or ideologically neutral and neglect these countries' heritage languages to a certain extent. Clearly, English plays a crucial role in the economic growth of several countries, especially small nations, which are at a disadvantage compared to countries with larger markets.

### ***The economy and the spread of English***

In order to understand the spread of English, it is important that we consider the case of Turkey. The first phase of the spread of English in Turkey began in the year 1950 due to the impact of American military and economic power. That was when English began to compete with French, the foreign *lingua franca* of Turkey until then. Turkey felt pressured to gain better access to English in order to make progress in technology and improve international communication. Thus, it was for the sake of modernization that the Turkish governments adopted English, which rapidly gained preference over other foreign languages. After the 80s, with the growing globalization phenomenon, English became indispensable for a successful career in practically any field. That was the second phase of the spread of English in Turkey. Although English is not an official language in Turkey, it is taught for the goal of maintaining international communication and the Turks who learn English do so mainly in search of better career opportunities.

Dogancay-Aktuna (2008) confirms the important role English plays in the job market as nearly all successful careers, if not all, have English proficiency as one of their basic requirements. This article also confirms the fact that a country's economic model plays an enormous influence over its language policies. Although Turkey, like many other countries, has issued many laws and language policies in support of its indigenous languages, nothing seems to be able to stop the omnipresent spread of English. The same countries that are attempting to issue laws to protect their local languages from the influence of English, are putting significant effort and money into developing successful English-teaching programs in their schools. However, due to the disparities in the way English is taught in public and private schools in Turkey, it is usually those who are at the top of the socioeconomic pyramid who have access to it.

García Delgado and Alonso (2011) look into Spanish from an economic perspective, and identify four of the most significant economic functions modern languages fulfill. First, they identify language as a market in itself, since language teaching and teacher training (as well as the production of resources) are fruitful economic activities. Second, they look at language as a creative medium in the cultural industry, which can be a

very important economic sector of a country, depending on its international reach. Third, they regard language as an important means to reduce costs with complex financial transactions among countries, and finally, they look at language as a hallmark, as an important aspect of collectivity, for it helps to determine the cultural and economic potential of a given community.

Spanish is a language with a great deal of economic value and rather than being left in the hands of the ‘spontaneous market’ should guarantee reason, its protection and supply. The objective of some is to convince us of the economic potential of Spanish, providing a plausible argument to defend the imperialistic expansion of Spanish not only in Spain, but worldwide as well. Evidently, it is not in vain that Spain’s language policies prioritize the promotion of Spanish over Basque, Catalan, and Galician, which are regarded as non-valuable languages in this economic perspective. Therefore, one must ask, in the case of English, are there any languages which have been deemed not valuable due to its spread around the globe?

### ***Minority-majority languages and globalization***

The issue of ‘subordinate languages’, such as Catalan in Italy, Occitan in France and Spanish in the US, brings to light that a world conquered by globalization, with its respective ideologies revolving around it, the role played by languages in the global market has an entire new significance. The idea of ‘language as a product’ in this new order, also explaining the concept of language as ‘human capital’, for it is “productive, costly to produce, and embodied in the person.”

Countless languages are being ignored in this economic logic, which is the reason why the author stresses the fact that linguistic diversity is a commodity in its own right. Article 3 of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity states that “cultural diversity widens the range of options open to everyone...” and it should be “understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence.” (Diaz Fouces, 2010, p.8)

Linguistic diversity is a commodity in its own right, at the same level as biological diversity, and in the way it favors cultural diversity over hegemonic tendencies of global languages. The maintenance of linguistic diversity has more to do with creating new policies and contexts to stimulate the usage of endangered languages than with applying measures focused on preserving these languages. In other words, linguistic diversity might have a chance to prevail in our globalized world conquered by English and a few other dominant languages.

Globalization maintains and perpetuate the imperialistic role of English, while speakers of most languages have their linguistic human rights overlooked. Analyzing English worldwide requires considering whose interests it serves, and many studies have attributed a capitalist agenda to the global English phenomenon.

The Diffusion of English versus The Ecology of Languages paradigms, initially proposed by Yukio Tsuda (as cited in Phillipson, 2001), is a successful attempt to enlighten the issue of how English is being strengthened over the weakening of thousands of local languages and cultures. Phillipson states that promoting the Ecology of Languages over the domain of English requires elevating language policies on political agendas and, by doing so, globalization can be made more sensitive to the needs of citizens from all over the world.

There are enough arguments to convince us that ‘global English’ represents special politico-economic interests which do not meet the real needs of the people whose languages and cultures are being conquered by English, along with its imperialistic ideologies. There is a considerable amount of literature on globalization and literature defending ‘global English’ as an essential tool for social ascension and economic growth in the global economy. However, the issue of linguistic human rights related to this new global order has received very little attention in the work of economists and political scientists.

### ***Language and ecology***

There are two language policy options and two language paradigms: *diffusion of English* and *ecology-of-language*. The former is characterized by a monolingual view of modernization which endorses the continuing spread of English while the latter involves promoting multilingualism worldwide, conceding linguistic human rights to speakers of all languages and respecting them.

Phillipson (2001) engages TESOL professionals in a reflective exercise about their praxis, leading them to consider whose interests and political agendas they are serving through their profession. There remains no doubt that triumphant English, with its evidence of linguistic, cultural, and media imperialism, implies an ideological globalization and homogenization of the cultures of the world. Therefore, it is indispensable that TESOL professionals understand that English can serve a number of worthwhile purposes provided that the linguistic human rights of speakers of other languages are respected.

If it makes economic sense for the English-speaking countries to try to turn most of the world into English-speaking, this is where TESOL comes in. Curiously, many still regard English-teaching as liberal profession when

it is undoubtedly an industry. The promotion of English as the ‘world language’ goes along with globalization but for the longest time, TESOL professionals were oblivious to sociopolitical and ethical aspects of English teaching. As English is the *lingua franca* of the UN, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and most of the world’s businesses and elites worldwide, it is the language in which the fate of linguistic rights of all the world’s citizens is decided. Can these linguistic human rights be taken into consideration in a world where English has triumphed?

### ***The possible decline of English***

There is some projection data to show the decline of English as the dominant language of the world, in terms of percentage of people who speak it as their mother tongue. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost 9% of the world’s population grew up speaking English as their first language. Nonetheless, according to a projection shared by the author, based on the UN demographic and linguistic projections for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, less than 5% of the world’s population will speak English as their first language in 2050 (Graddol, 2014).

While a few languages such as Arabic and Hindi are rapidly making their way up to the top, and Chinese is well established as the world’s largest language, 90 % of the 6,000 languages at the base are doomed to become extinct. We might be losing a language every day around the globe, while on the other hand, new languages and hybrid languages are constantly emerging in the urban areas in the world.

The decline of English as the world’s dominant language is based on the idea of native speakers. English will play towards creating a ‘new linguistic order’ in which the new generations will be either bilingual or multilingual, with English being one of the languages they speak. English is not becoming the global language at the expense of other languages. However, there is a need for language policies to be created in order to preserve the endangered languages of the world, the new languages emerging in the globe can make up for the loss of thousands of other priceless and irreplaceable languages becoming extinct.

### ***Marketing and language as commodity***

The idea of language as an ‘exchange-facilitating institution’, as well as something valuable in its own right has a lot in common with money, another indispensable exchange institution. Language can be considered a ‘network’ good, if one analyzes it from an economic perspective. In other words, the number of people using a particular language is essential to its growth. For one, the larger the population using the same language, the more

new words will be coined by its speakers. For another, the more people using a specific word, the more likely it is for others to know the meaning of that word and incorporate it into their vocabulary.

The growth of the English language since its beginnings in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, in the form of a Saxon dialect, and exemplifies how different economic systems contributed towards adding new words to the extensive range of vocabulary of English, as well as influenced the obsolescence of several words.

It is important that we not disregard how linguistic forces and imperialistic interests influenced both the expansion and spread of the English language. Approaching other factors that contributed towards the development and growth of English was evidently not the sole objective of an economic analysis (Reksulak et al., 2014). Interestingly, the growth of English has always been proportionally related to the gross national product of the countries who spoke it and the size of the population communicating in this language.

Of the Alberta Languages Initiative is being marketed and why marketing techniques are being used. According to the author, the province's government had to bring forth marketing tactics to persuade parents and students to 'buy in' to the concept of mandatory second language learning, for example, a 'tool kit' containing articles and advertisements that the schools can include in their newsletters. The author states that Alberta has been sensitive to the economic pressures of globalization and, for this reason, the commodification of second language teaching in public education has been viewed as something necessary which must be propagated and marketed by the province's government. The importance of this study lies in the fact that it explores why and how marketing strategies have been selected and used in public schools throughout the province of Alberta, while analyzing the repercussions this may have for educational programs in the future.

Although the word 'marketing' in education is related to several misconceptions, this study presents it as something that is not necessarily negative, but necessary. The fact that the mandatory second language program in Alberta did not have enough 'buy in' among parents and students led the authorities to incorporate the business philosophy and practice, which in different economic periods, would not have been accepted by a traditional model of education.

### ***Language immersion***

Foreign language immersion programs have been gradually spreading since 1971. Although this approach had a timid beginning, today it is viewed as a

highly effective means of teaching foreign languages to children. The reasons for the rapid growth of foreign language immersion programs are: (1) parental pressure for quality language programs in which children can acquire high proficiency in a language other than English; (2) increased cultural awareness and interest in multicultural approaches; (3) increase in schooling options that facilitates immersion as a schooling alternative; (4) considerable amount of research on the efficacy of immersion programs and their ability to increase student achievement and language proficiency and, finally, the increasing recognition of the importance of being proficient in languages other than English, for educational, personal, economic and national security reasons.

Lenker and Rhodes (2017) support the key-role that languages play in the academic, personal, cultural, and economic success of an individual and, consequently, a country. Although some have disregarded the importance of bi-/multilingual literacy for the longest time, it is in fact in times of need (or trouble) that new alternatives are made possible. If crisis creates opportunities for great leaders, it makes perfect sense that educational leaders and linguists are awakening to the importance of being multilingual in today's globalized economy and society. This perception has been around for three decades but, as the authors put it, this is the national momentum to develop a 'language-competent society'.

### ***Language and national security***

There is a critical need in the US for proficient speakers of languages other than English. Due to the 21<sup>st</sup> century economic globalization and terrorism worldwide, there is an urgent need for Americans who can successfully communicate with people from other cultures. Although this recognition has been around for at least 50 years (since World War II), it was especially after the events of September 11, 2001 that this need for multilingual Americans was enhanced and the Department of Defense adopted new measures to guarantee that every military officer be proficient in at least one foreign language.

Augmenting national security is not the only purpose foreign languages can fulfill in the US. Besides protecting the United States from their enemies, foreign language abilities can facilitate diplomatic relations with other nations and can satisfy specific economic requirements. The authors proceed sharing some important data on the measures language policymakers are taking to promote foreign language learning in the US, especially critical non-western languages such as Arabic, Turkish, Persian and Chinese. Finally, a language framework can potentially enhance foreign



language acquisition in the US and prepare it to face a world full of security, economic and leadership challenges.

Second language abilities are essential assets in today's global economy and diplomatic relations, among others. In the US, particularly, foreign language skills now play a key-role in elevating and maintaining national security in a country where a vast majority of its inhabitants is still monolingual Jackson (Jackson & Malone, 2009)

The language framework proposed by the authors is undoubtedly out of the ordinary. It is very well laid out, comprehensive, and most importantly, standards-oriented, making it an objective and achievable foreign language proposal. However, there is not an emphasis on the fact that besides the knowledge of foreign languages and cultures, Americans need to have a better understanding of international geography and history, as well as global current events, to be able to succeed in their relations in the global community and marketplace.

## Discussion

Although some linguists and language policymakers might see the 'global English' phenomenon as a natural consequence of globalization, it wasn't naturally that English triumphed as the omnipresent language of the world and remains invincible in its position. English is unquestionably a commodity in itself, with its teaching, teacher training and production of resources representing a very profitable industry. Besides attracting profits for being a commodity good, it has also guaranteed the economic growth of most countries around the world, which wouldn't have been able to survive in the global marketplace without the *lingua franca* of business, science, technology and politics.

Phillipson's ideas mentioned in this paper are successful in convincing the reader that global English does serve special interests of political and economical elites in the world, and English is in fact becoming the global language at the expense of local languages and cultures around the world. Even though English may be seen as an empowerment tool in today's global economy, supporting the fact that not knowing English leads to exclusion, language policymakers can neglect the need to create new language policies and contexts to stimulate the usage of endangered languages in the world today. While theorists like Graddol defend the idea that the countless new languages emerging in the globe can make up for the loss of thousands of other priceless languages becoming extinct every day, it is important to continue to stress linguistic diversity as a commodity in its own right, in which each language is absolutely irreplaceable.

When language policymakers awake to the fact that cultural diversity is a legitimate means of achieving a “more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence”, and when they quit analyzing it simply in terms of economic growth, linguistic diversity might still have a chance to prevail.

These interests do not meet the needs of the people whose local languages and cultures are being left aside. The problem with English as the global language and an indispensable means to become empowered in the global economy lies in the fact that it is being propagated as the language of the world at the expense of the other languages from the world. The spread of English, even if seen as a natural humankind phenomenon based on the idea of ‘flux and reflux’, does not naturally guarantee the preservation of the local languages around the world.

## Conclusion

It is plausible to conclude that although English represents a profitable commodified good and industry, and global English serves special politico-economic interests, its spread worldwide is not necessarily good or bad, but necessary. Its promotion as the *lingua franca* around the world has not happened as a natural phenomenon of humankind, but it can serve a number of worthwhile purposes as long as that the linguistic human rights of speakers of other languages are no longer left aside. English may not be an indispensable means to be empowerment in the globalized economy and marketplace. However, without speaking English today, it is very hard to communicate with the rest of the world even though it English represents special politico-economic interests.

As the world has becomes smaller, the people are unifying their language to communicate with one another. Although some still see English as an imperialistic language, or the ‘language of the colonizers’, it is undeniable that English is an empowerment tool in today’s global community. Not knowing the hegemonic language of the world leads to exclusion. Some even argue that the expansion of English as the global language does not necessarily threaten the local languages of the world. The people who speak English as a second language will not quit using their native languages, as they serve different purposes.

## The author

Dr. Miguel Mantero is a Professor of Educational Linguistics in the College of Education at The University of Alabama. Among Dr. Mantero’s many

interests are cognition and second language acquisition, language teacher identity and education, and the use of literature to enhance second language learning.

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